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More logistics, less aid: Humanitarian-business partnerships and sustainability in the refugee camp

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies logistics – the science and practice of managing complex operations and moving goods – as an essential yet overlooked dimension of the alignment of global business and global aid in the UN 2030 Agenda era. Focusing on refugee aid, it draws on qualitative fieldwork with practitioners in the field of humanitarian logistics, active in the partnership environment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in five countries (Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Rwanda and Sweden). The analysis shows how aid workers see profit and non-profit partnerships for humanitarian logistics as a priority in the context of the so-called humanitarian-development nexus. In particular, logistics is considered essential to bring refugee aid in line with emerging standards of sustainability. The article puts forward a twofold argument. First, it shows how sustainability policies prioritize logistical solutions that are based on the integration of the displaced in local and transnational markets, rather than on the delivery of material goods and infrastructures. Second, in a slight departure from existing literature on humanitarian logistics, it argues that the agency of the humanitarian sector, and not just that of the corporate world, is central in the promotion of humanitarian logistics partnerships. The conclusions discuss the ethical and political implications of a humanitarianism increasingly oriented towards supply-chain rationales, in which more sustainable logistics often equates less material aid.

1. Introduction

From November 7 to November 8, 2018, a group of 62 humanitarian logistics experts gathered in Rome, Italy, for a global meeting on the topic of reverse logistics. Not without irony, as the Italian capital, after years of steady deterioration in its infrastructures, was slipping into a waste management crisis of its own that would reach its peak during Christmas 2018, humanitarian logisticians from all over the globe were debating how to optimize the re-use and disposal of relief items in post-disaster and forced displacement settings. Such is the promise of reverse logistics: to make disaster relief sustainable in a disaster-prone world. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and leading non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the field of refugee aid, like Care International and the American Refugee Committee, were taking part in the conference. The opening panel identified in a recent displacement crisis a revealing example of the unsustainable environmental impact of humanitarian response. In the Rohingya emergency, in Myanmar, it was observed, "the use of bamboo for refugee shelters had caused a shortage of locally-procured supplies" (GLC, 2018: 8). The report published after the meeting by the UN-coordinated Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Global Logistics Cluster (GLC)[1] highlighted an emerging consensus: in order to become sustainable, refugee aid needed better technical solutions for the sourcing and circulations of goods and materials. In other words, more and better logistics. This consensus had already led to the founding of the Logistics Emergency Team (LET), a partnership initiative promoted jointly by the World Economic Forum and the UN through the GLC, and comprising four world-leading logistical companies: UPS, A.P. Moeller Maersk, Agility and DP World. Since 2005, LET had "responded to 17 major emergencies and provided essential information to Logistics Capacity Assessments (LCAs) processes to help humanitarians prepare for and respond to emergencies" (GLC, 2018: 2). Until 2017, LET's involvement had been

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[1] The other IASC clusters are: Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Shelter, Protection, Nutrition, Health, Food Security, Emergency Telecommunications, Education, Early Recovery, and Camp Coordination and Management. The World Food Program (WFP) leads the Global Logistics Cluster (GLC) and hosts it in its headquarters in Rome. Acting as a coordinator and facilitator for common logistics operations that involve all the other clusters, the GLC's work intersects with that of all the other clusters, particularly the areas covered in this paper such as WASH, shelter and camp management. See https://logcluster.org/about-us (accessed 16.9.2020).

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limited to "emergency responses that were the result of a large natural disaster affecting more than 500,000 people" (GLC, 2018: 2). At the beginning of 2018, after the World Economic Forum's Davos meeting, the partners agreed to expand the scope of operations to so-called "complex emergencies", involving people caught in areas of conflict, internally displaced persons and refugees. Indeed, the LET 2018 report identifies Syria as a paramount example of its expanded mandate (GLC, 2018). According to LET, forced displacement is a logistical issue that requires the joint efforts of humanitarians and corporations (see Ziadah, 2019).

This article explores logistics as an essential yet overlooked dimension of the cultural, political, and infrastructural alignment of global business and global aid in the UN "2030 Agenda" era. The empirical inquiry focuses on refugee aid, and is based on qualitative fieldwork with practitioners in the field of humanitarian logistics, active in the partnership environment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in five countries (Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Rwanda and Sweden). The analysis shows how practitioners see humanitarian-business partnerships (HBPs hereafter) in the field of logistics as essential to adapt refugee aid to emerging standards of financial, environmental and societal sustainability in the context of the so-called humanitarian-development "nexus" (Howe, 2019). Adding to the findings of important recent studies of humanitarian infrastructures and supply chains (Attewell, 2018; Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020; Ziadah, 2019), the article puts forward a two-part argument. First, it foregrounds the agency of non-profit actors in partnerships for humanitarian logistics. In particular, it highlights how the drive towards the expansion of calculative logistical rationales to refugee governance – particularly in areas such as information and data management, education and cash assistance – emerges primarily from within the humanitarian sector. Second, it shows how, amidst efforts to make refugees and displacement sustainable and economically viable, better logistics means less focus on the delivery of material aid (such as goods and infrastructures) and more on integrating the displaced in markets, and optimizing information and financial flows through refugee settlements (Lenner & Turner, 2018; Turner, 2020; Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020). Both these trends are rooted in decades of ideological and operational change in humanitarianism and development, including the move away from modernization paradigms (Pupavac, 2010) and the rise of technocratic approaches focusing on innovation (Scott-Smith, 2016). However, the centrality of supply chains rationales in XXI century capitalism, the emergence of humanitarian logistics as a science (Ziadah, 2019) and the sustainability-oriented policies that characterize the humanitarian-development nexus make logistics increasingly important in shaping humanitarian futures.

The article proceeds as follows. Through a review of recent critical literature in the social, economic and managerial sciences, the first two sections outline the conceptual framework of the article providing a definition of humanitarian logistics, and examining the role of humanitarian HBPs in refugee aid logistics in the Agenda 2030 and UN "cluster" approaches, with their focus on sustainability. The empirical material is then analysed following the three main areas in which logistics acts as a facilitator for HBPs in refugee aid, as emerging from the study: environmental, financial and societal sustainability. The corresponding three sections of the paper foreground as main findings the agency of the non-profit sector in promoting HBPs, and what I call "the dematerialization" of refugee aid logistics.

1.1. Humanitarian logistics and the dematerialization of refugee aid: A review

Logistics, the art of managing complex operations and moving goods, developed as a modern military discipline. Codified in Napoleonic times, it turned into a civilian and commercial endeavour, and a managerial science, after WW II (Cowen, 2014; Pettit & Beresford, 2005). Particularly since the 1960s, the changes brought about by the standardization and diffusion of shipping container technologies led to the expansion of logistical managerial rationales to the whole of production, from design to packaging (Cowen, 2014; Levinson, 2008; Rodrigue & Notteboom, 2009). While partly shaped by the expansion of civilian techniques for the management of supply chains and by the commercial private sector, humanitarian logistics owes much of its early modern development and expansion to international aid's proximity to the military, particularly in the US (Attewell, 2018).

In an influential report on its pioneering collaboration with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) published in 2005, the Fritz Institute, a California-based non-profit institution focusing on disaster response analysis, provided the following definition of humanitarian logistics.

> *The process of planning, implementing and controlling the efficient, cost-effective flow and storage of goods and materials, as well as related information, from the point of origin to the point of consumption for the purpose of alleviating the suffering of vulnerable people. The function encompasses a range of activities, including preparedness, planning, procurement, transport, warehousing, tracking and tracing, and customs clearance* (Thomas & Kopczak, 2005: 2, see also Thomas, 2004).

The authors of the report diagnosed the widespread misrecognition of the importance of logistics in global aid and disaster response, and prescribed the creation of a transnational professional community for humanitarian logisticians; with dedicated university training programs and conferences (see also Van Wassenhove, 2005). A little over a decade after the Fritz Institute report was published, the expansion of humanitarian logistics as a field of studies in business, economics and managerial sciences was already impressive (Pascucci, 2021; Ziadah, 2019). By the end of 2018, the *Journal of Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management* had published eight volumes of peer-reviewed research on the topic, mostly in the disciplines of business and management. Since 2009, 15 special issues entirely devoted to humanitarian logistics and humanitarian operations management had been published in international peer-reviewed journals (Kovàcset al., 2018).

This expansion in the volume of literature has also led to an expansion of the definition provided by the Fritz Institute. Humanitarian logistics now reaches well beyond the time and spaces between procurement processes and custom clearance, and proficiency in logistical management is a "pre-requisite for career advancement in the (humanitarian) sector" (Ziadah, 2019: 1696). The *Handbook of Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management*, published by Palgrave in 2018, covers a highly diverse range of topics. Significantly for the aims of this article, among the themes flagged in the introduction are "the use of logistics emergency teams of commercial logistics service providers in humanitarian logistics" and the management of "a sudden influx of refugees" (Kovàcset al., 2018: xxxiv). Introducing the first international special issue on "refugee logistics", Oloruntoba and Banomyong (2018) point to seven major areas of research (Pascucci, 2021). Among them, one finds traditional logistical questions such as corridors and the supplying and re-supplying of internally displaced people (IDPs) and besieged populations, food and medical equipment supplies, and the logistics of waste management. However, the paper also suggests three somewhat novel priority themes: the sourcing and deployment of refugee shelter, the tension between temporary logistical solutions and the protracted nature of contemporary displacement crises, and design and facilities layout in conditions of protracted encampment (Oloruntoba & Banomyong, 2018).

As the following sections will show, these emerging issues in refugee relief are the areas where the expansion of humanitarian logistics meets international aid and development's decades-long preoccupation with fostering the economic agency of refugees, and promoting technological innovation-based solutions (Pascucci, 2017a; Pascucci, 2019; Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020; Scott-Smith, 2016; Turner, 2020). This encounter leads to what this article calls a "de-materialization" of refugee aid, namely a tendency to move away from provisions of material relief – from food parcels to viable roads to transport them – to privilege beneficiaries' access to local and transnational service markets, and their economic activation and self-reliance. This is evident in UN policies such as the cluster approach, of which the GLC is part, which have gained prominence since the mid-2000s (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015). Promoting cooperation between different agencies to tackle issues of displacement and camp-management in an integrated multi-sector manner, the cluster approach frames refugee camps as spaces "with the potential for developing community and entrepreneurial populations" (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015: 334). In 2017, the UNHCR General-Secretary Filippo Grandi summarized some of the more recent evolutions of these policies as striving to establish the "credit history and economic identity" of refugees, in order to promote their access to services, particularly in the financial sector (Grandi, 2017) quoted in Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020).

That the merging of sustainable development and humanitarianism, foregrounded by policies like the cluster approach, would lead to less investment in material forms of aid is in itself hardly a surprise. Scholars attentive to the histories of development and disaster relief like Vanessa Pupavac (2010) have shown how, at least since the 1970s, the shift from modernization to sustainable development paradigms has foregrounded non-materialist takes on development, such as psychosocial therapeutic interventions and the capabilities approach. Logistics, however, is the sciences of "getting the goods" (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008), and its practice is marked by a constant reckoning with the unstable materialities of objects, landscapes and labour (Schouten et al., 2019). As the empirical sections of this article will show, this material side of humanitarian logistics is still present in practice, and indeed appears resilient. The materiality of aid supply chains has a compelling character that is impossible to transcend fully (see Donovan, 2015). Yet, at a closer critical look, humanitarian logistics as a managerial rationale and the merging of aid and sustainable development in the refugee camp converge in their tendency to prioritize information and markets over the delivery of actual, material aid. The desire for "an improved humanitarian response capacity and coordination" that underlies policies like the cluster approach (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015: 334) is the same drive leading humanitarian actors to resort to ever more sophisticated logistical management systems that rely also on digitalization and financial abstractions. Already in 2005, the Fritz Institute report cited above highlighted the primary role of "information and community" in humanitarian logistics:

> *While moving relief items to disaster sites will continue to be an important role for logistics, the strategic focus must be on providing timely information, analyzing that information to garner insight as to how to improve operations, and learning internally and with others* (Thomas & Kopczak, 2005: 13).

Today's humanitarian logistics hubs, such as Dubai's International Humanitarian City, appear as conglomerates of not only infrastructures, but also of financial and information services that "serve to connect and mediate internationalised supply chains across the globe" (Ziadah, 2019: 1688). This search for efficiency and sustainability is the basis for more than just "the privatisation of logistics functions or the internalisation of market imperatives within humanitarian action" (Ziadah, 2019: 1688). Rather, the logistification of development and aid involves "constructing populations on the receiving end as customers to be "serviced"" (Ziadah, 2019: 1689; see also Duffield, 2018). Analysing the provision of biometric technologies and financial services in refugee camps in Jordan, Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty (2020: 619) observe how forced displacement settings offer "opportunities for businesses beyond contracts for material infrastructures", and "function as laboratories for company tech development and patents". "Techvelopment" (Scott-Smith, 2016) and other dematerialized forms of interventions in refugee camps, Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty (2020) write, blur the boundaries between aid and the corporate world in ways that trouble received assumptions about HBPs. These insights point to the centrality of humanitarian logistics as a space of aid dematerialization and "datafication" at the humanitarian-business interface. The following section engages with literature on logistics partnerships to further articulate this article's approach to HBPs in refugee aid.

1.2. "Capitalism will benefit refugees at a larger scale than humanitarian delivery can": understanding humanitarian-business partnerships for sustainable camps

> *. . . Capitalism will benefit refugees at a larger scale than humanitarian delivery can. So, it's in effort to influence markets to behave in a hopefully more transparent [manner] or for the markets to behave in a way that's more optimal for the consumers in that market*. (UNHCR officer, Beirut, Lebanon, November 2016, see also Pascucci, 2017b)

This quote, from an interview with a UNHCR officers working on innovation in shelter provision for Syrians displaced to Lebanon, illustrates well the blurring of boundaries between humanitarianism and business in the governance of displacement diagnosed by Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty (2020). Humanitarian professionals' embrace of business rationales, their active role, and the two-ways relation between for-profit and non-profit actors, in which the latter often influence the former, characterize a partnership environment in which logistics plays an increasingly important role.

Cooperation and partnerships are at the core of the networked spatial imaginary of logistics. Business literature on commercial supply chains – which, like that on humanitarian logistics, grew exponentially over the last 20 years – has long highlighted the correlation between effective partnerships and collaborations and enhanced performance (McLachlin and Larson, 2011). The current emphasis on "green" and sustainable supply chains is leading to renewed attention to the role of trust and cooperation in the sector (Gardner et al., 2019). Over the last two decades, these discussions have gradually been extended also to humanitarian logistics (Tomasini & Van Wassenhove, 2009a; 2009b;; Cozzolino, 2012). "Multi-stakeholder cooperation between the private and public sectors" (GLC, 2018: 7) is now largely seen as the most efficient way of bypassing the inherent logistical shortcomings of humanitarian aid. These include lack of understanding of and integration in global supply chains by small non-profit actors (McLachlin & Larson, 2011) and NGOs' dangerous tendency to duplicate efforts while competing for scarce funding (Kovàcs & Spens, 2007, Seybolt, 2009). The traditional view of HBPs in humanitarian logistics thus involved a pro-active private sector, always running ahead of the non-profit world, providing services and solutions that remedied aid's chronic inefficiencies. The 2005 Fritz Institute report observed that, at the time, the "underdeveloped state of logistics in the humanitarian sector" was "much like corporate logistics was 20 years ago", that is to say suffering from "underin-

vestment, a lack of recognition, and the absence of a fulfilling, professional career path" (Thomas & Kopczak, 2005: 7).

As humanitarian logistics developed into a managerial science, the relation between aid and private sector actors also evolved significantly. The UN-promoted Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) incorporate a more complex and nuanced view of HBPs. According to Rolando Tomasini (2018: 633), from the United Nations Office for Project Services, the SDGs require

> *A cross-sector dialogue that integrates the private sector not as a supplier, but as a source of expertise, capacity to innovate, and potential to promote economic inclusion when it is guided to build local capacity, especially with a gender balance focus.*

While seemingly reiterating some of the older, widespread views of the for-profit private sector as the leading actor in innovation (see also Tomasini & Van Wassenhove, 2009a; 2009b), Tomasini (2018) introduces here a more complex approach to collaborations for humanitarian logistics. He argues for a "network based approach", in which partnerships are established "around a set of well-defined development objectives" that are shared by "multiple stakeholders" (Tomasini, 2018: 629). In such networks, humanitarian and development organizations move beyond their views of the private sector "merely as a market actor" acting "as a supplier" (Tomasini, 2018: 630). Logistics-based sustainable interventions take place within humanitarian partnership environments that encompass a variety of actors, and result in heterogeneous operational processes.

This heterogeneity questions narratives of univocal transfer of logistics expertise from the commercial to the humanitarian sector (Duffield, 1997; Joachim & Schneiker, 2018; Smillie & Minear, 2004). Joachim and Schneiker (2018) have warned against explanations of NGOs' firm-like orientation that are based on resource scarcity, lack of efficiency and operational complexity. "Broader ideological and cultural changes", they write, "are occurring" that highlight "an ideational alignment" among different actors "from their increased interactions in conflict zones" (Joachim & Schneiker, 2018: 182). Rather than in a unidirectional transfer of expertise from the corporate to the humanitarian world, this "alignment" results in "intersecting and blurred markets" where new operations of value extractions and exchange are explored (Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020: 620, see also Andersson, 2018). As the science allowing these multi-actor operations to run as smoothly and sustainably as possible, at times achieving significant degrees of sophistication, humanitarian logistics is central in these markets (Dubey and Gunasekaran, 2015).

Literature on innovation in humanitarianism provides interesting initial clues as to the role humanitarians play in these partnerships environments. Among others, Duffield (2018) and Scott-Smith's (2016) have convincingly described, although from different perspectives, global humanitarianism's enthusiastic embrace of the 'Californian ideology' of Silicon Valley. Although the language and some of theoretical approaches of humanitarian innovation do originate in the private sector, humanitarians are dynamic and driven proponents of technological solutions and market-oriented policies (Scott-Smith, 2016). These changes may be seen as rooted in the geopolitical shifts that have marked conflict and disaster governance since the Global War on Terror (Duffield, 2018), or in the long-standing liberal and neoliberal orientations at the core of modern humanitarianism (Duffield, 2018; Scott-Smith, 2016). Whatever their origins, this paper will show how these changes see humanitarians willfully moving from the provision of material aid through direct action to the facilitation of emerging markets through remote management technologies and partnerships with business. After a brief methodological note, the next three sections of the paper will explore how humanitarians mobilize logistics, as the science of sustainability that lies at the core of today's refugee aid, in order to prioritize interventions centred around the integration of beneficiaries in markets.

2. Methods and fieldwork

The analysis that follows is based on extensive qualitative fieldwork (3 years), including a variety of locations and combining different qualitative methods. In total, 34 interviews (20 with aid workers and 14 with private sector professionals), 4 expert statements and 4 professional conference panel transcripts were analysed. These were collected between 2016 and 2019 in the context of a broader project focusing on innovation in refugee aid and involving field research in Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Rwanda and Sweden. These countries were selected based on two main criteria: 1. They are significant refugee-receiving countries and host large humanitarian operations (Jordan, Greece, Lebanon, and Rwanda), 2. They hosted events related to partnership initiatives, business conferences, or the headquarters of major enterprises active in the field of refugee aid logistics. More specifically, Greece hosted the 2016 LATRA humanitarian design and innovation hackathon, in Mytilene; Rwanda the 2019 Health and Humanitarian Logistics conference, organized by Georgia Tech and sponsored, among others, by DHL; while Sweden is home to the headquarters of the IKEA Foundation-owned social entreprise Better Shelter, a major UNHCR partner.

Participants were recruited in the following manner. Formal contacts were first made with key informants in IGOs and major INGOs in 3 of the 5 countries where research was conducted (Jordan, Lebanon and Rwanda, fieldwork in Greece and Sweden was more targeted – see below). These resulted in 4 qualitative interviews with UNHCR and UNICEF logistics and innovation officers and 3 NGO officers working in the logistics, shelter and water sanitation and hygiene sector (WASH). The rest of the qualitative sample was recruited through a snowballing technique articulated along two main axes: following through the recommendations and contacts provided by the key informants, and working through personal and professional contacts of the author and her colleagues and collaborators. The snowballing sample included IGO and NGO managers, field workers and logisticians, and private sector actors. All were active in the partnership environment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Fieldwork also included ethnographic observation at a humanitarian design hackathon in Mytilene, in 2016, and at a major international humanitarian logistics conference (Kigali, Rwanda, July 2019). In Sweden, qualitative interviews were conducted exclusively with the staff of Better Shelter. All the interviews conducted for the study revolved around two main themes: logistical challenges in the shelter and WASH sectors, and the role of the private sector in humanitarian aid, with particular reference to HL. The ethnography included encounters with representatives of refugee groups and refugee community organizations, as well as volunteers, activists, and concerned individuals with a refugee background. However, given the aims and scope of this paper, this material is not included in the analysis, and has been explored elsewhere (Conti, Dabaj, & Pascucci, 2020; Kallio, Häkli, & Pascucci, 2019). The material collected was indexed and coded using a qualitative analysis software (ATLAS). In the following pages, it is organized thematically around three sustainability-related areas of intervention (environment, finances, society), as identified by the practitioners interviewed. Through these three angles, the analysis explores some of the ways in which logistics contributes to a dematerialized aid that functions through markets, and the proactive role humanitarians play in logistical partnerships.

2.1. "Grey industries" and green logistics

Until recently, environmental policies had remained marginal in humanitarian logistics (Peretti et al., 2015). As the vignette opening this article shows, however, this trend is being reversed by growing preoccupations with the environmental impact of aid. Since the Haiti earthquake, in 2011, virtually all major disaster and displacement responses have been accompanied by calls for measures aimed at containing the impact of used and unused humanitarian items, as well as their packaging (GLC, 2018). Peretti et al. (2015) have argued that, notwithstanding these calls, green logistics policies in the humanitarian sector remain in the realm of good intentions, or, at best, future plans. Such diagnoses have resulted in attempts to introduce reverse logistics rationales, today an established policy trend and area of research in commercial supply chains, into the humanitarian field. Rogers & Tibben-Lembke, (1999: 2) define reverse logistics as the planning, implementing and controlling of flows of "goods and related information from the point of consumption to the point of origin for the purpose of recapturing or creating value or proper disposal". The related term "green logistics" refers more broadly to the minimization of the environmental costs of supply chains.

Environmentally aware approaches are gaining tractions among practitioners working in the fields of refugee shelter, WASH, and camp logistics and infrastructures more broadly. Among the professionals interviewed for this article, these preoccupations cut across the for-profit and non-profit divide. Significantly, humanitarians did not perceive them as externally imposed through the SDGs consensus, and the prescribed adoption of reverse logistics managerial rationales. Rather, professionals described them as resulting from the alignment of humanitarian policies, state-led interventions and business rationales in complex crises, in which displacement meets climate change, and both act on the backdrop of shrinking donor budgets (see Joachim and Schneiker, 2018)

The logistics of refugee shelter is a case in point. The narratives of professionals working in this field highlighted the 'dual' pressure they constantly faced in their work, namely the "need to ensure that shelters provide a safe and suitable environment for both short- and long-term accommodation" (Oloruntoba & Banomyong, 2018: 290). The lifespan of shelter products – family tents, shelter kits, fiberglass containers etc. – was a paramount preoccupation for shelter practitioners working in refugee camps in Greece, between 2015 and 2018. After the European Union (EU)-Turkey statement on refugees was implement in the first half of 2016, many of the refugee camps on Greek islands became facilities for the protracted containment of migrant populations that must undergo screening and selections before accessing asylum request procedures (*hotspots* in EU parlance, see Pallister-Wilkins, 2018). Others were turned into precarious residential sites for people waiting for their applications to be processed by Greek authorities (hospitality or asylum seekers centres, as Greek municipalities often refer to them).

In this geopolitical landscape, the need for longer lasting shelter infrastructures and efficient disposal and reuse required continuous logistical adjustments (Pascucci, 2021; Wain, 2017). As one of the Greece-based suppliers interviewed put it, temporary shelter procurement, and HL in general, became "grey industries, dynamic and ever-shifting" (Interview with supplier, Athens, Greece, April 2019). The producer, whose client portfolio encompassed state agencies and major international organizations, referred here to the rapidly changing requests from their partners, particularly in relation to the disposal and reuse of prefabricated housing products.

The extreme precarity of Greek refugee camp infrastructures, brutally exposed by the fire that destroyed the Moria hotspot, in Lesvos, in September 2020 (Tazzioli, 2020), leaves little ethical and practical room for the implementation of green refugee logistics. Nevertheless, the need to comply with green expectations, at least on paper, was felt strongly by national providers dealing with global humanitarian clients (IGOs, EU agencies etc.), in a sector where both government authorities and non-governmental actors operate with strong visibility and reputation concerns. This compounded the complexity of a partnership and market environment shaped and controlled, in the perceptions of the interviewees, by humanitarian actors. Here, the assessment of Peretti et al. (2015) of humanitarian green logistics as pertaining to the domain of unfulfilled good intentions is confirmed. The example also highlights the role that governmental actors exert in HBPs. The political and legal dimensions of humanitarian logistics, however obscured by its technocratic language and calculative approach, emerge as crucial (Ziadah, 2019). As will be further explored below, in many cases private sector professionals expressed more attentiveness to these dimensions than humanitarian staff.

Implementing the transition to renewable energy sources for household consumption in the country's main refugee camps, UNHCR Rwanda was complying with national government policies (UNHCR officer 1, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2019). Both the previous camp energy model, based on firewood, and the newly promoted with, based on cash distribution to refugee households for the purchase of briquette and pellet fuel solutions and liquified petroleum gas (LPG), involved work with private sector partners. In both cases, however, these partnerships were mediated by the Rwandan state, in particular by the Ministry of Emergency Management (MINEMA). On the one hand, the Ministry participated by mediating relations with suppliers. On the other, private sector suppliers, working in partnership with the UNHCR, were implementing government policies on energy transition.

The case of the logistics of energy provision in Rwandan refugee camps confirms this study's argument about aid dematerialization and the agency of the humanitarian sector in HBPs. First, it exemplifies the shifting perceptions of inefficiency and expertise between the aid and business sectors. Here, humanitarians measure and assess the performance of the private sector partners and of the market models they operate with, rather than the other way around. Second, the case highlights the trend towards the "dematerialization" of refugee camp logistics. In responding to governmental requirements as to the "green transition", humanitarian actors in Rwanda did not resort to traditional HBPs based on supplier-client relations in the logistics of energy provision. Rather, the creation of camp-based local energy markets was encouraged, in which refugees can buy directly the products and services that they once used to receive as assistance. The aim was to achieve low-carbon transition by was achieved by substituting direct aid delivery with an outsourced logistical model that involved the integration of the refugee camp in a local market. Refugee households acting as (semi)autonomous consumers replaced the resource-intensive humanitarian logistics operations that underpin the direct provision of aid.

The UNHCR, however, retained a central role in the process. Refugees can buy alternative fuels thanks to the cash assistance provided by the UNHCR and its partners, and the agency works to develop and implement incentives for refugees to invest the provided financial assistance on energy products. Moreover, measures were put in place to control the existing, irregular market for firewood which further developed as the energy transition policy was implemented (interviews with UNHCR officers 1 and 2, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2019). In other words, the hybrid market for alternative fuels in refugee settlements could not exist without UNCHR and the state's mediation.

Evidence from other refugee-receiving countries confirms the active role humanitarian agencies play in partnerships that are expected to respond to environmental sustainability concerns.

The following quote from an interview with a UNICEF officer in Jordan, refers to UNICEF's work with private sector partners in the WASH sector in the Zaatari and Azraq refugee camps.

> *We are managing that private sector company (sic) and I think there was a bidding process that went out, and we saw the bids that came back and did the review process and that whole supply process went through. So, even in an innovation process, you're identifying the kind of thing you need, but you still have to go through that internal business management process.* (UNICEF officer 1, Amman, Jordan, March 2017)

Here, UNICEF exerted its leading role in the partnership through the UN's own managerial and bureaucratic apparatus. Other interviewees also referred to the latter as a resilient structure that was adjusting to, rather than being bypassed by, innovation policies and the increasing reliance on HBPs in HL.

2.2. Cutting costs

The costs of poor humanitarian logistics are a widely acknowledged liability in management and engineering literature. To mention but a recent example, in their work on food voucher programs for refugees in Jordan, Verme and Gigliarano (2019) highlight how complex and dysfunctional logistics, determined by basic infrastructural (i.e. deficient roads) or organizational problems, can often render vain optimal targeting efforts implemented under budget constraints. Optimized logistical models are regarded as efficient tools for responding to not only environmental concerns, but also financial pressures.

Commenting on the energy transition, the humanitarian logisticians interviewed in Rwanda discussed the complex and expensive operations required by the old model of cooking fuels distribution in camps. The transition to the local markets model had solved a number of intractable logistical problems, they highlighted, including the reliance on partners in the local transportation market, perceived as fragmented and inefficient even where the state of the road infrastructure was overall satisfactory (Interview with UNHCR officers 2 and 3, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2019). In this context, cash assistance – one of the pillars of the energy transition programs – worked also to downsize expensive logistical operations.

> *We are going to CBIs (cash-based interventions) for the most part of the assistance we are delivering. So, there is no intensive use of logistics, which is good, because distribution puts a lot of the assistance budgets into logistics costs. We want the money to go for services and goods. We don't want it to go to support costs.* (UNHCR officer 1, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2017).

The views expressed in the extract above were widespread among the practitioners interviewed. In an era of shrinking and shifting international aid budgets and increasingly insecure operational environments, enhancing HL efficiency is fundamental also for retaining legitimacy in the eyes of donors (see also Gustavsson, 2003).

Also in relation to finances, refugee shelter and settlement emerge as areas in which needs for updated and optimized logistical models are particularly urgent (Oloruntoba & Banomyong, 2018). In this regard, significant tensions are emerging in the shelter field around the viability of partnerships models. Although UNHCR's policy formulations contemplate variegated solutions that include socially-sustainable community based accommodations (i.e. hosting agreements etc., see Pascucci, 2017a), in recent years the agency has invested significant resources in process-oriented partnerships aimed at developing specific shelter products (McLachlin & Larson, 2011). The Better Shelter kit, produced by the homonymous Swedish social entreprise with the support of the IKEA Foundation, is perhaps the best-known example in this regard.

The product is a structure in metal and plastic having a total surface of 17,5 square metres. It is shipped in the IKEA signature flat-pack, as a kit ready to be assembled on site. The product has an approximate lifespan of 3 years, thus providing a temporary and flexible structure, which can nonetheless be used in the context of protracted displacement. UNHCR has worked closely with the non-profit firm since the very early stages of product development (Pascucci, 2021).

Here, two aspects of the Better Shelter case are particularly interesting. First, as I have explored elsewhere (Pascucci, 2021), in this operation a complex logistical issue in displacement governance – protracted permanence of camps – was solved through the design and production of a standardized "humanitarian good". This highlights how "goods" and materialities are an aspect of humanitarian logistics that cannot be fully transcended (Donovan, 2015). Historically, aid to disaster and displacement-affected populations rests on the distribution of relief items (Redfield, 2012). In refugee settings, such items constitute the core infrastructure of camps, and characterize the landscape of the early phases of humanitarian response.

The second interesting aspect in the Better Shelter case lies in the partnership model, which raised as much interest as criticism among humanitarian practitioners. This involves the charitable foundation of a major corporate actor – the IKEA Foundation – acting as a mediator, advisor and investor, and facilitating the collaboration between the UNHCR and a small and emerging social entreprise specialized in emergency shelter design. While seen as an example of private sector oriented logistics, the partnership included three different kinds of non-profit actors: a humanitarian one, a corporate-funded charitable foundation, and a social entreprise. The Better Shelter operation was met with skepticism, particularly, but not exclusively, within the UN system. Critical voices, as the one expressed in the extract below, highlighted in particular the sustainability limits of a partnership in which the central private sector actor – Better Shelter – is entirely dependent on the humanitarian community for its revenue model, thus creating a self-contained humanitarian market.

> *This is where we're caught in a bit of a catch 22, or I don't know what do you call it when the snake eats itself. We've invested in the research and development with IKEA Foundation, we've now hit it over to Better Shelter, which needs to find a revenue model. That revenue model is dependent on the humanitarian community, purchasing it at high enough quantities where the price point can come down and the supply chain... So, there's a bit of a self-dependency factor there, that I think hasn't been proven yet, I guess in a sense. That's one of the potential strengths but also potential weaknesses of that model because it's solely within the humanitarian ecosystem.* (UNHCR officer, Lebanon, November 2016)

Such critiques saw in the Better Shelter partnership model a reiteration of traditional procurement patterns, and highlighted the allegedly problematic expansion of UNHCR supply and procurement operations, coordinated by the Division of Emergency Response, Security and Supply (DESS). In the years leading up to the Better Shelter partnership, the agency's procurement volume increased by an average of 20% per year (from 389 million USD in 2011 to 951 million in 2015; Blecken, 2016, see also Pascucci, 2021). The chain of mediators or "middle men", as the following quote refers to them, constituted by NGOs and charities was considered as an impediment to transparency and traceability – growing concerns in global supply chain management (Gardner et al., 2019) – and to financial sustainability.

[*Engagement with the private sector*] *it's to do with the fact that we know it's cutting out the middle man a little bit, the old model in which we engage with the NGO and the NGO engages with the private sector. It's to do with cost efficiencies, it's to do with having a more direct oversight of those private sector contractors where we're not having to deal with this middle man* (UNICEF officer 1, Amman, Jordan, March 2017)

Although in the Better Shelter case the non-profit mediator holds the logo of an extremely influential corporate actor, its eminently humanitarian character was regarded as a limitation. This highlights the faith of humanitarian professionals, in this case the UN system, in market-based solutions, and their active role in promoting HBPs.

2.3. "Whole-of-society" or "whole-of-market"?

In Lebanon in 2016, the need to provide displaced Syrians with emergency accommodations led to an interesting experiment promoted by protection officers affiliated with the UNHCR Innovation service. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the country had adopted a no-camp policy that included severe restrictions to the typologies of refugee shelters permitted. Concrete buildings and other permanent structures were forbidden in refugee settings. In 2015 Lebanese authorities denied authorization for a prototyping trial of the UNHCR-sponsored Better Shelter (Interview with Better Shelter designer 2, Stockholm, Sweden, December 2016; see also Pascucci, Häkli, & Kallio, 2018). In the summer of 2019, the policy would lead to extensive demolitions across the country. Refugees were thus left to find accommodation on the private market for rent or in so-called informal tented settlements, hyper-precarious temporary housing that had flourished both in urban and rural areas. In this bleak landscape, given the political and operational impediments to infrastructural interventions in the field of refugee shelter, UNCHR promoted initiatives that dematerialized assistance by aiming at integrating the displaced into the local rental market. This included collaborations with start-ups aimed at prototyping a smartphone application that would put refugees in search of accommodation in the Beirut area in contact with local property owners (Pascucci, Häkli, & Kallio, 2018). The initiative involved pro-bono consultancies offered by AirBnB, and was described by its promoters as "an investment in a purely private sector market to be run by the private sector" (UNHCR officer, Beirut, Lebanon, November 20196).

The market-oriented values expressed by the protection officers appeared oblivious to the political dimensions of Lebanon's policies, which local activists and NGO staff regarded as rooted in years of racialized marginalization and militarization of refugee settlements in the country. Turned into a "refugee logistics" problem (Oloruntoba & Banomyong, 2018), the strict limitations posed by the Lebanese authorities' to the direct provision of sustainable shelters were addressed through technology and HBPs.

Of particular interest, in the Lebanon case and beyond, is the fact that many of the aid workers met while conducting research for this paper held more positive views on the humanitarian potential of markets and the private sector than their commercial and supply chain counterparts did. Although emphasizing their know-how and innovation potential in the aid sector, leading global companies like UPS continued to acknowledge the centrality of public institutions and governments in humanitarian logistics networks.

If you think of an organization of our size, we're in 220 countries, I mentioned the amount of employees, but we have millions of customers. So, everything is local to us [...] *an organization like ours has a lot of capability. There's a lot of knowledge, there's a lot of insight, and* [UPS] *is willing to be disruptive and bringing some new ideas to the place, to the marketplace. And demonstrate that public–private partnerships can work with the collaboration, with the commitment from the government, and the commitment from partners that are in-country as well as our global partners, and together we can make some change happen.* (James Coughlan, Global Solutions Director UPS, 11th Health and Humanitarian Logistics, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2019)

The views above may have been influenced by the specific political context in the country where they were expressed (Rwanda), where collaboration with the government sector was described as significantly smoother than in Lebanon. However, they are also representative of the more nuanced views on the potential of humanitarian markets held by established commercial private sector actors, who rarely expressed the same faith in market solutions as humanitarian professionals. Speaking at the same event, Peter Okebukola of the management-consulting firm McKinsey & Company highlighted how effective supply chains require not only a material infrastructure, but also a legal one, further highlighting the centrality of public institutions for effective humanitarian logistics networks.

I'm sure across many of our countries we've seen examples of private sector actually playing very important roles. What we haven't seen is a real holistic system-wide inclusion of the private sector. [...] *And I do think that there are really two big boxes here. So* [...] *if you think about the governance. Fundamentally, the private sector and public sectors generally tend to have different points of view. The private sector is very much of a commercially-driven entity versus a more altruistic, if you will, perspective from the public sector. But I think shared values are critical, so how do we make sure we can think about governance with shared values? From my perspective, you need to think about the legal framework, that's very important.* (Peter Okebukola, Associate Partner at McKinsey & Company, 11th Health and Humanitarian Logistics Conference, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2019)

These views are particularly interesting when read in the context of the Lebanese case outlined above, in which refugee logistics problems originated also from lack of domestic refugee legislation. It is significant that private sector management consultants would stress the role of the public sector and of efficient legislation, while UNHCR protection officers express their belief that viable solutions may come from partnerships with platform capitalism giants.

Although often confronted with a cautious for-profit private sector, however, the humanitarians met while conducting research for this article described business involvement as the only way forward. In Jordan, in 2017, UNICEF was working with tech start-ups to prototype and implement smartphone applications and software as pedagogical supports in refugee children learning programs, mostly in camps. Yet another form of downsizing and dematerialization of humanitarian logistics was at work, as such technologies allowed distant learning and various form of community schooling, thus bypassing the need to build and supply school infrastructures. As in the Lebanon case, the "whole of society approach" provided a framework to eliminate humanitarian logistics needs perceived as unsustainable, in the context of displacement crises that are at the same time increasingly protracted and, due to restrictive migration and asylum policies, increasingly intractable.

I think we are working with a new approach now, the "whole of society" approach, where we don't only partner with the usual suspect, the NGOs and everything. But we want to partner more and more with private sector [...]. *Providing assistance is not the only way to go. They* (sic) *want refugees more and more to be self-*

reliant, because we know that the length of their stay in a refugee camp is between, an average 17 and 20 years. So, operating this transition with the usual suspect doesn't work. (UNHCR officer 1, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2019).

By eliminating "the usual suspects" – the NGO sector – and their logistical models, the whole of society approach allows to dilute refugee aid and protection into market-oriented development, and merge humanitarian logistics into the agile supply-chains of 21st century economies.

3. Conclusions: more logistics, less aid

As displacement extends through time, less direct aid is provided to refugees, and for an increasingly limited amount of time. Information, often delivered through mobile apps, replace material aid. Services are outsourced to local markets, and displaced persons reframed as clients (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015). Although this dematerialization is often contested and ambivalent (see Pascucci, 2017a; Pascucci, 2021), it allows to cut logistical costs, while compounding the merging of refugee assistance into sustainable development.

In themselves, these dynamics are not new (Pupavac, 2010). This article, however, has offered an initial, exploratory assessment of the role humanitarian logistics plays in them. As a long-established military-humanitarian technology and a solid managerial science, logistics provides refugee aid with a unifying, efficiency-oriented paradigm, a framework for networked cross-sector collaborations, career paths (Ziadah, 2019), and the legitimacy that comes from the growing attention to sustainability in supply chains.

Building on the insights of important recent research (Duffield, 2018; Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015; Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020; Ziadah, 2019), the article has highlighted forms of humanitarian logistics collaborations that go beyond the for-profit and non-profit partnership model as such. In this context, it has shown, accounts of unilateral transfer of logistics know-how from the private sector to the humanitarian one should be received critically. Such unidirectional knowledge transfer was regarded as essential in re-centering humanitarian rationales around efficiency, transparency and sustainability in the early phases of development of humanitarian logistics (Tomasini & Van Wassenhove, 2009a; 2009b). However, HBPs for refugee logistics appear as much more complex environments. Aid agencies play a key role in shaping and controlling logistics operations in hybrid markets characterized by blurred boundaries between the private and the humanitarian sector (Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020). Humanitarian actors are often the first and most confident proponents of market-based solutions that bypass the non-profit sector entirely – getting rid of the NGO "middle men", as one of the UN officer interviewed put it. As in the case of the Better Shelter, humanitarians exert significant control the design and logistical processes in the production of specific relief items. UN staff claim to assess, promote or discard private sector partners in ways that bestow them with significant power over local, national and transnational markets. The result is hybrid humanitarian markets centred around border zones and refugee camps, where value is extracted and produced from displacement itself (Andersson, 2018; Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020). As the organizing rationales behind these processes, humanitarian logistics should be the object of further social scientific research.

In her essay *Condemned to Repeat?*, Ex-MSF fieldworker Fiona Terry (2002) asked whether a humanitarian action "reduced to a logistical exercise" would not be more efficiently carried out by "supermarket chains" without "humanitarian pretence." This paper has demonstrated the ongoing relevance of Terry's (2002) provocation. Better logistics can lead to less aid, and to a blurring of boundaries between aid and profit that questions humanitarianism's core values and missions. Yet the material examined also suggests that this provocation may be an illusion, although one many humanitarians are eager to embrace. As in the Greek case examined in this article, the promise of green humanitarian logistics is often an empty performance for the consumption of media and donors (see Peretti et al., 2015). Even more importantly, logistics – whether commercial or humanitarian – relies on networked infrastructures and legal frameworks established and maintained through continuous negotiation with state and government actors (see, among others, Khalili, 2020). As argued by Stephen Hopgood (2008: 116), the "rule of logistics" (Le Cavalier, 2016) confirms Max Weber's insight that bureaucracy, calculability and "the rational administration of complex tasks" and globalization are "potential allies not enemies". Whether in Greek hotspots or Rwandan refugee camps, humanitarian logistics may be able to influence changing political structures and decisions. More often, however, it can only offer fixes that adapt to them, and can operate only with the support of governments and the law. Corporate logistics managers, this paper has shown, are often more aware of the centrality of public and government institutions than humanitarians are.

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